



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P. O. Box 7882 Madison, WI 53707-7882

For Immediate Release: January 30, 2017
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Let Voters Choose Their Legislators, Not The Other Way Around

By Rep. Don Vruwink

Although I am new to the Wisconsin State Assembly, I am very familiar with gerrymandering and its detrimental effect on democracy. As a teacher of United States history and advanced placement government at Milton High School, I led many discussions about how politicians for decades have been drawing district boundaries to put their own party at an advantage.

The word gerrymander was first used in 1812 in the *Boston Gazette* to describe the way the Massachusetts state senate districts were drawn. The districts were designed to keep power in the hands of the party that drew the maps. Gov. Elbridge Gerry signed the bill that created the districts. One district was said to resemble the shape of a salamander. Thus, the term “gerrymander” was born.

My conversations about gerrymandering have gone beyond the high school classroom. I have heard concerns from people across my Assembly district and across Wisconsin. One only needs to look at our legislative districts to know that manipulating political boundaries to favor one party has very real consequences. Communities as small as the Village of Oregon are divided into two different legislative districts, leading to confusion as to who represents who. When districts are tilted unnaturally in favor of one political party or the other, the incumbent becomes entrenched and may have little incentive to work hard on behalf of his or her constituents.

The outcome of elections in the majority of legislative districts is pre-ordained because of the convoluted way the district boundaries were drawn. This leads to a sense of disenfranchisement. For example, Republicans in a district that was artificially created to favor Democrats may feel that their vote does not count.

Making districts competitive lowers the level of partisanship because candidates need to run campaigns that appeal to voters in a bipartisan way instead of simply appealing to one party or the other. Sure, some districts will naturally favor one party over another, but making legislative districts as competitive as possible will require candidates to be closer to the center in their political philosophy. I believe this would lead to more collaboration and bipartisanship from our legislators.

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It is my duty as an elected official to find solutions to the problems facing our community and state. That is why I introduced legislation that would create a non-partisan redistricting process. The bill also creates a five-person redistricting advisory commission and provides greater transparency to ensure the process is open and the results are fair. These measures will move us toward the goal of voters picking their politicians, not the other way around.

As much as I would love to see my first bill work its way through the legislative process and become law, I recognize it is unlikely. There are more than three dozen co-sponsors, none of whom is a Republican, and they are the party in control. No matter who is in charge, it is virtually impossible to get a bill passed that does not have support from the majority party.

It is my hope that my redistricting reform bill at least becomes a topic of conversation at the dinner table, in the classroom, and around the water cooler in communities across Wisconsin. I think most people would agree that our politics have become too partisan and that the divisiveness hurts our democracy. I will continue to advocate for non-partisan redistricting reform as long as I have the privilege to serve the good people of the 43rd District in the Wisconsin State Assembly.

Rep. Don Vruwink represents the communities of Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, part of the Village of Oregon, and several townships. He can be reached by email at Rep.Vruwink@legis.wi.gov, by phone at 608-266-3790, and by mail at P.O. Box 8953, Madison, WI 53708.

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